

Jazzing Up Your Rock Playing part 3 - Melody

by [Dennis Winge](#)

Growing up as a rock guitarist who only discovered jazz, classical and other genres later in life, I now see that of all the basic elements of music (melody, harmony, & rhythm) I had the biggest disconnect to melody. I suspect this is very common, and I attribute it to the fact that in rock bands, the guitarist's role (when not soloing) is most often to play chords behind a singer. So harmony (the chords) and rhythm (the strumming/picking) are the guitarists primary concern and melody is someone else's job.

It wasn't until I learned how to play chords and melodies at the same time that I really began to appreciate melody as an essential musical element. Playing chord melodies can make your soloing much more melodic, because it teaches you to pay attention to your note choices as they relate to the particular chord that is passing. The same notes played over different chords changes the *pitch function* of those notes (more on this later). Besides, it will give you a sense of satisfaction to be able to play a piece that sounds complete, with melody and chords, on the guitar.

For the purposes of highlighting that you don't need to play jazz or classical material to appreciate chord-melody playing, I have chosen a very distinctly rock and roll example: Sweet Child of Mine by Guns 'n' Roses. Here is the melody of the first verse:

The image shows the first verse of 'Sweet Child of Mine' by Guns N' Roses, written in 4/4 time and the key of D major. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single staff with guitar tablature below it. The first system covers measures 1-4, with a D chord in measure 1 and a C chord in measure 3. The second system covers measures 5-8, with a G chord in measure 5 and a D chord in measure 7. The tablature uses numbers 1-10 for fret positions and includes a 7th fret barre in measure 3. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some notes beamed together. The piece ends with a whole rest in measure 8.

There are things to be learned just by playing the melody. Notice the anticipation that happens over every chord change. (In other words, Axyl Rose sings the note that comes on each chord change and 8th note before the downbeat.) This is very common in rock music since the rhythm section is generally much more four-on-the-floor and driving, and the melody balances that out with syncopation.

Next, let's look at how the pitches relate to the key. It is extremely useful to think in numbers, meaning that you assign each note in the key's scale with the number of its position in the scale, as illustrated below. (If you are unfamiliar with how to construct major scales, see my [article on that topic](#).)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
d	e	f#	g	a	b	c#

It is very useful to think in numbers for many reasons, one of them being the ability to

transpose. This is something that rock players can rarely do, but I do it all the time in my rock band and people compliment me on how the songs “sound like my own.” This is after years of struggling to hit notes sung by Bono, Paul McCartney and many other male rock singers whose range is way higher than mine.

For example, my ideal key for “Sweet Child of Mine might be G. So I can instantly transpose it like this:

Original melody key of D:

| a g f# | g a f# d g | g f# d g | g f# e d g | etc

Numeric analysis:

| 5 4 3 | 4 5 3 1 4 | 4 3 1 4 | 4 3 2 1 4 | etc.

Transposed melody key of G:

| d c b | c d b g c | c b g c | c b a g c | etc

Another thing to pay attention to is how the melody and the chords are related. This will assume that you know how harmonized scales work (and if you don't, see [my article here.](#)) This will help you understand how each note functions against the chord that supports it (called pitch function.) Now the analysis looks like this:

D					C
a	g f#	g a f# d g	g f# d g	g f# e d g	etc

Numeric analysis as melody relates to chords:

| 5 4 3 | 4 5 3 1 4 | 5 #4 2 5 | 5 #4 2 5 | etc.

Now we can appreciate how, through the use of the #4 against the C chord, for example, the melody is interesting harmonically as well. Thinking in numbers against the chords may seem like a lot of work but the immediate pay-off is that you can create a chord melody of the tune. You will know which notes are chord-tones (i.e. 1, 3, or 5) and you can easily accentuate those notes with the chords themselves, as in this example:

Knowing how the melody works against the chords can also help you make choices about what *voicings* to use. Suppose, for example, that you don't like having to go all the way from 5th position on the D chord to open position on the C chord. So you map out the fact that the melody on the D chord, as indicated earlier, is:

| 5 4 3 | 4 5 3 1 4 |

You then figure how you can grab those intervals in a lower voicing and you come up with this:

Years ago I had a weekly solo guitar gig in a restaurant in which the owner wanted instrumental rock and pop songs, so I would make up intervallic sketches for myself like this version of the Rolling Stones' "Ruby Tuesday." Ten years later, I can quickly grab the chord melody again on the fly without getting bogged down reading standard notation or tablature.

Ruby Tuesday - solo guitar

verse

	F#-	E		D	E		A		%	
	1 1	1 4		1 5	5 6		5			
	F#-	E		D	A		E		%	
	1 1	1 4		1 1	2 3		1			
	F#-	B7		E			F#-	B7		E
	1 1	7 7		1	1		1 1	7 7		1 5 7
	A						E			
	3			1 2 3			1			

chorus

	A	E		A			A	E		A
	3 2	5		4 3 2 1			3 3	5 5		4 3 2 1
	A	E		G	D		E	A		E
	3 3	5 5		2 2	5 5		5 5 6 4 1			

There are so many more things we could talk about in the study of melody, but if like me, you are a guitarist whose primary concern is chords, then making up or finding chord-melodies of songs you love can really help you appreciate melody in its own right. It will improve your ear, your music theory knowledge, your fretboard theory, and your melodic sensibility.

Have fun and let's hear those chord melodies!